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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 000969

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TAGS: PREL PTER KPAL FR IS

SUBJECT: NO CHANGE IN FRENCH POLICY TOWARD HAMAS, DESPITE PRESS CLAIMS TO THE CONTRARY

REF: PARIS POINTS FOR 19 MAY 2008

Classified By: Acting Political Minister Counselor Andrew Young for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: French MFA DAS-equivalent for the Levant Ludovic Pouille denied on 20 May any change in French policy toward Hamas following erroneous reports that the GOF had resumed contacts with Hamas. No dialogue or official contacts, beyond "technical" ones related to security carried out by French intelligence services, are going on. Pouille called FM Kouchner's public handling of a journalist's questions about reports of such contacts "maladroit" and provided the background to retired French diplomat Yves Aubin de la Messuziere's visit to the Gaza Strip last month as a private researcher with no official mandate from the GOF. Even though Messuziere had no official standing, however, Pouille justified the GOF and other government's using individuals like him and former President Carter to remain abreast of Hamas thinking and to repeat the conditions laid down by the Quartet that Hamas must meet in order to play a role in peace negotiations. Pouille expressed appreciation for the understanding way the White House and the Department had responded to press queries about this matter, and he was chagrined to learn that a demarche may still be forthcoming on the subject. Yesterday saw a second day of heated exchanges on this subject at the French MFA's press briefing, at which its spokesperson repeatedly stated French policy toward Hamas has not changed and that there are no official contacts ongoing. In light of these declarations and the conversation with Pouille, Embassy believes we should accept French statements at face value and note that France understands our concerns. End summary

¶2. (C) We used a 20 May meeting that was to have been devoted to Lebanon with French MFA DAS-equivalent Ludovic Pouille to ask about reports the GOF has resumed some sort of political contacts with Hamas (per ref) and to register Washington's concern over such a development. Pouille emphatically denied that French policy toward Hamas had changed, either with respect to the EU's designation of Hamas as a terrorist organization or as regards EU/Quartet demands that it recognize Israel's right to exist, renounce violence/terrorism, and accept previously negotiated Israeli/Palestinian accords as prerequisites to dealing with Hamas in any "official" capacity. In addition, there is no dialogue going on or any official contacts that would deviate from EU-mandated policy.

¶3. (C) According to Pouille, France has no intention of changing its policy as long as the status quo persists. Hamas is a terrorist group, although France also believes that Hamas represents a significant current of Palestinian political opinion that cannot be ignored. Israel's attempts to wipe it out militarily have not succeeded, and France believes it is imperative to cultivate all sources of information about the group and what it represents. In this context, Pouille argued, France and other countries, should take advantage of individuals having unofficial contacts with Hamas to stay current as to the group's thinking and to take

advantage of such meetings to reinforce the international community's message. This approach was entirely consistent with President Sarkozy's desire to maintain "passageways" to regimes or organizations beyond the pale, even when official contacts are impossible.

¶4. (C) With specific reference to the controversy stirred up by the article in the center-right newspaper "Figaro" and FM Kouchner's subsequent statements to the media seeming to confirm that official contacts with Hamas had occurred, Pouille asserted this was a misimpression. He bluntly termed Kouchner's comments "maladroit" and suggested that Kouchner may not have seen or been briefed on the "Figaro" article when asked about it. By way of background, Pouille related that former French diplomat Yves Aubin de la Messuziere, who is now a researcher with Sciences-Po university, had indeed contacted the Quai beforehand about his intended visit to Gaza and meetings with Hamas officials. Kouchner, who knew Messuziere from his posting as French ambassador to Italy prior to Messuziere's retirement, was informed of Messuziere's intentions. According to Pouille, Messuziere wanted to make sure his trip and meetings would be okay (i.e., that the French government had no objection to either) and to get a briefing on the GOF line toward Hamas. Pouille stressed that the MFA had neither given Messuziere a message to pass nor asked him to take on a mission for the GOF. Although he did not explain why de la Messuziere had implied some sort of official status in the "Figaro" article, Pouille acknowledged that Hamas had done all it could to manipulate coverage of this revelation and exploit it for the sake of political gain.

PARIS 00000969 002 OF 003

¶5. (C) Regarding "Figaro's" reference to French intelligence services resuming their contacts with Hamas, Pouille said these were few and "technical." They were primarily related to security, i.e., to facilitate the movement of French officials in the Gaza Strip and protect the few French interests there (e.g., a cultural center and medical clinic operated by a French Catholic charity). Pouille likened the contacts to those he understood to have taken place recently when one of General Dayton's subordinates had visited Gaza. When we asked whether any contacts might relate to efforts to free French/Israeli dual national IDF soldier Gilad Shalit, in Hamas captivity for over a year, Pouille repeated that the GOF is not directly involved in negotiations with Hamas over Shalit. Those efforts are entirely confined to Egyptian discussions with Hamas without France playing a direct role.

¶6. (C) Returning to one of his central points, i.e., that France eschews contact with Hamas but believes it vital to understand as much as possible about Hamas and its political views, Pouille said that France does not discourage visits to Gaza or meetings with Hamas leaders by academics, former politicians (like Jimmy Carter), intellectuals, or former government officials like de la Messuziere or Jeremy Greenstock. Pouille referred as well to the Russians, Norwegians, and other governments that maintain contacts with Hamas. Like it or not, he continued, the Gaza Strip must be part of a larger solution to the Palestinian issue. There is no way to exclude it from a final settlement or to ignore the views of its population. Pouille emphasized France's shared desire that this occur in a manner consistent with the requirements laid down by the Quartet. In this respect, the GOF would remain careful to respect the Palestinian Authority's lead as it involves contacts with Hamas. Pouille affirmed that the GOF has no desire or standing to question President Mahmud Abbas' authority in this regard.

¶7. (C) We informed Pouille that, notwithstanding public statements at the White House and Department that the USG understood French policy had not changed with respect to Hamas and that Messuziere's contacts had been strictly unofficial, the Department was considering a formal demarche

to the GOF expressing concern about a possible shift in French policy toward Hamas. Specifically, we pointed to the risk of how any shift might be misinterpreted in light of France's assumption of the EU presidency in July as well as how it might undermine the ongoing Annapolis process.

Pouille understood Washington's "inquietude," and he was grateful for its public handling of this matter, but repeated that nothing had changed vis-a-vis Hamas or in terms of French support for the ongoing Annapolis process. France shares the American desire for a two-state solution and does not see a role for extremism or terrorism in such a vision. He noted that he would accompany FM Kouchner for meetings this weekend in the Palestinian territories aimed at supporting the Palestinian private sector, an effort that was an outgrowth of the Paris conferences of donors to the Palestinian Authority last December.

¶18. (C) Comment: The furor continued over this matter for a second day at the French MFA's press briefing May 20, with the spokesperson receiving more intense and hostile questioning than the previous day. Central to the exchanges was the question of how the USG had reacted to news of French "contacts" with Hizballah. The MFA spokesperson drew extensively from transcripts of the Department and White House press briefings to turn back reporters' attempts to portray this episode as a serious crisis in U.S./French relations over Middle East policy. She also used the occasion to reiterate more than once that France's policy had not changed on Hamas and that Hamas' repeated recourse to violence was unacceptable.

¶19. (C) Comment continued: The French consider this matter closed. Although it is true that Pouille has privately expressed an apparently widespread view among French diplomats that the EU designation of Hamas as a terrorist organization ties France's hands more than they would prefer (the different situation vis-a-vis Hizballah is notable in this context), we see no sign that France has changed or wants to change its policy. President Sarkozy and FM Kouchner have not changed their view of Hamas as a terrorist organization nor their commitment to France being a full and supporting partner in the cause of a peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. Kouchner's imminent trip to the Palestinian Authority and Sarkozy's visit next month to Israel and the West Bank underscore their seriousness, which they would not want abridged by some misunderstanding over Hamas. Embassy's assessment is that indeed French policy toward Hamas has not changed.

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PARIS 00000969 003 OF 003

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